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SUBJECT Former Polish Ambassador Spasowski Interviewed

DAVID HARTMAN: In December of 1981, the Communist government of Poland declared martial law. Less than one week later, the Polish Ambassador, Romwald Spasowski, asked for political asylum, the highest-ranking Communist government official ever to defect to the West. Ambassador Spasowski has written a book about his career and his decision. It's entitled "The Liberation of One." And the Ambassador is with me this morning.

Good morning. It's nice to see you again, Mr. Ambassador.

ROMWALD SPASOWSKI: Good morning. Good morning.

HARTMAN: When did you begin to think, begin to realize, "I want to get out. I want to leave Poland. Something is wrong here"?

SPASOWSKI: Well, I think it was a long time before I took this step. It means I thought for a long time that something is entirely wrong in socialist Poland; and that if I ever would like to tell the story of my life, it has to be after leaving the country.

But it was a painful way of thinking because I was always very much attached to my country, to the people, to their longings.

So, I think that what I would like to say, that the final decision which I took was immediately after the crackdown.

HARTMAN: Of martial law in 1981.

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SPASOWSKI: Of martial law.

HARTMAN: Why not in '56, and why not in 1970, when strikers, when dissidents, when the people of Poland rose up and were beaten back down again? What was it that was different about the imposition of martial law in '81?

SPASOWSKI: I think that, number one, I was different, still. I was at the very beginning of my activities in socialist Poland, I was an idealistic communist. I was atheistic. And I felt at that time strong attachment to socialist ideas.

I became disillusioned afterwards, more and more. But it was a long process.

HARTMAN: What went wrong with communism, in your mind? If you were idealistic as a kid, but then became disillusioned, how does what we see now in the communist world, what we call the communist world, betray the idealism that you saw as a child?

SPASOWSKI: Well, I would say that the main thing which concerned me was how communism was treating workers. But in 1956, I was in the United States. I was Ambassador to the United States at that time, so I was not in Poland. I was at that time faced with the dilemma, what to do?

I was called to the Department of State -- I write about this in my book -- and I was asked by Robert Murphy, at that time Undersecretary for Political Affairs: do I consider the events in Poland as internal affair, or international issue? "International issue" meaning that the Soviets are intervening in internal affairs of Poland. And I responded to him that it is an international issue.

HARTMAN: Briefly, let me ask you this. What can we do? The people of this country admire, respect the people of Poland. We know this. You know this from being here so much in this country. Very briefly, what can Americans do to try to help the people of Poland? If anything.

SPASOWSKI: Well, I think that Americans can do much.

First of all, I would like to say this: Solidarity lives in Poland.

HARTMAN: It does live.

SPASOWSKI: It does live in Poland. That means that Solidarity lives in the hearts and minds of the people.

HARTMAN: Let me interrupt you right there, Mr. Ambassador. I wish we could talk longer.